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For years, civilian employees at the Navy base in Lakehurst, N.J., have earned more than their counterparts at nearby Army and Air Force installations.

With federal officials planning to merge the three bases, Rep. John H. Adler (D., N.J.) has introduced legislation that would equalize pay across the combined, 42,000-acre facility.

Yesterday, he released a report detailing the discrepancy in the "locality pay areas" that cover Fort Dix, McGuire Air Force Base, and Naval Air Engineering Station Lakehurst. Locality pay areas are cost-of-living zones that determine salary adjustments for federal employees across the country.

The Burlington County bases of McGuire and Fort Dix are in a Philadelphia-area zone; their civilian employees are paid 7 percent less than those at Lakehurst, in Ocean County and a New York-area zone.

In Adler's report, he calculates that Lakehurst civilian employees make \$2,747 more per year than their Dix and McGuire counterparts.

As part of a nationwide realignment initiated by the Department of Defense in 2005, the adjacent bases are to become a joint base by Oct. 1.

"For the first time you have people working for the same boss . . . but they're getting paid at different rates," said Col. Gina Grosso, the joint-base commander.

Adler said that civilian employees - administrative assistants, mechanics, nurses, and engineers - working at the joint base but earning different wages could create a "morale" problem. The bases have a combined 4,000 civilian workers.

In the past, Grosso said, the different pay rates typically meant that employees from Dix and McGuire quickly filled any openings at Lakehurst.

"If you could do the same thing and only drive 20 minutes but make 7 percent more, wouldn't you do it?" Grosso said.

Additionally, Adler pointed out, the Defense Department has called for closing Fort Monmouth, which is also in the New York-area locality pay zone.

Though Fort Monmouth employees are being moved to Aberdeen, Md., federal civilian employees can work wherever they prefer, Adler spokeswoman Kathryn Prael said. If the salaries at the Burlington County bases are raised to make them more attractive to the Monmouth employees, Adler said, his legislation could help save jobs in New Jersey.

"We'd like as many of those folks that want to work with us as possible because we have a lot of

vacant jobs," Grosso said.

Adler said his bill would cost about \$3 million, which would come from the existing defense budget.

He added that the bill had support from Rep. Ike Skelton (D., Mo.), chairman of the Armed Services Committee.

"I'm very optimistic we'll get this done in the next few weeks," Adler said.